

BOOK REVIEWS

Rod Macleod (ed). **Snapshots on the Journey Through Death & Remembrance: Poems Selected by Rod Macleod.** Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2002, 124 pp., ISBN: 1-877228-67-2.

Mitch Albom. **The Five People you Meet in Heaven.** New York: Hyperion, 2003, 196 pp, ISBN: 0-786868-71-6.

Making Peace with Walking the Ridge

Some would say that the incarnation of the modern "death and dying" book genre can be dated from the publication in 1967 of James Agee's Pulitzer-Prize-winning "near-perfect work of art" *A Death in the Family* (1). Through Agee's poetic prose, the reader's lived experience becomes achingly fused with that of a caring family wrenched apart by senseless tragedy. His contribution to our collective psyche is placed in context when one realizes that this remarkable work antedated Elisabeth Kübler Ross's *On Death and Dying* by two years. Together they sensitized us to the fact that we are finite. It was a jarring awakening for a society uniquely ill-prepared to deal with death.

A flood of books, films, newspaper articles, television talk shows, and general media coverage relating to death, dying, and bereavement has ensued. Yet we continue to struggle with the fact of our transience. Half a century after Agee's death in 1955, our sensibilities around the topic of our mortality continue to be anesthetized on a daily basis. Perhaps immunization is a better metaphor. We have been repeatedly immunized by the existential vacuum now endemic in our culture; the values infusing our obsessive consumerism; progressive urbanization and the breakdown of the nuclear family; multiple genocides and the video game technology of apparently bloodless wars in which enemy death becomes "collateral damage"; the instant communication that daily feeds our living rooms with sound-bite catastrophes from each corner of the globe; the omnipresent megathreats—the population explosion, dwindling non-renewable resources, the ecologic destruction of our planet—that haunt our vision of

the future. Overwhelming change, instability, uncertainty, and a sense of pervasive vulnerability mark our time. It is hardly surprising that we remain heavily defended when confronted by our mortality.

Two current contributions to our ongoing societal commentary on death arrived on my desk simultaneously, during one recent week. Each, in its own way, is a child of the times. Each reveals something about our collective psychic response to death. *Snapshots on the Journey Through Death & Remembrance* offers a collection of poems selected by Rod MacLeod, a palliative care physician in Wellington, New Zealand; *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* is a novel written by American newspaper columnist and author of the bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom.

Eddie died on his 83rd birthday in an accident at the amusement park where he had worked since childhood. The promise of Eddie's youth had, in the years following the war, given way to grayness, loneliness, and a work routine bereft of meaning. In *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, we journey with Eddie into the afterlife, where, we are told, our destiny is to meet five people whom we have encountered with life-changing consequences during our time on earth. With their guidance, our earthly existence is explained, clarity achieved, and, with meaning imbued by hindsight, our burdens lightened. With the apparent ease of the consummate storyteller he is, Albom skillfully weaves together retrospective vignette snapshots of Eddie's life, while introducing us to Eddie's rag-tag five. The resultant page-turner is somehow more than a light read, thanks mainly to Albom's narrative skills.

The second volume, *Snapshots on the Journey Through Death & Remembrance: Poems Selected by Rod Macleod*, brings together 75 poems by a wonderfully disparate group of writers that range from New Zealand physicians Rod MacLeod and Glenn Colquhoun to such notables as Emily Dickinson, John Donne, WH Auden, T.S. Eliot, Kahlil Gibran, John Keats, D.H. Lawrence, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Dylan Thomas, and Rainer Maria Rilke. This handsome